Seven Misconceptions About Unconscious Bias



Unconscious biases are, well, unconscious, which makes them hard to identify, much less know their true impact. It's a complex and sometimes controversial issue. Is it any wonder that there are so many misconceptions around what to do? Before you can take steps to operate more fairly and effectively at work, you need to get your bearings.

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Misconception #1

Most unconscious bias is around gender and race

There are a lot of visible company-wide efforts to counter bias around gender and race, like initiatives to reduce pay disparity between groups.

However, gender and race are far from the whole landscape. We also have biases based on people's job function, age/generation (e.g., Millennials), socioeconomic status, family/domestic status (e.g., married, parent), nationality, language ability, veteran status, culture, sexuality, weight, height, physical ability, attractiveness, political affiliation, remoteness (e.g., how much face time they put in at the office), hair color, and even seemingly mundane characteristics, like how messy someone's desk is or how powerful they look in their chair.

This doesn't mean you can or should monitor every thought and action for bias against every kind of person. However, you can revisit the overall fairness of your procedures and decision-making on a regular basis (maybe once every quarter or six months), helping build a more inclusive culture at work.

Misconception #2

Bias is all about disliking certain groups



To surface your biases, you need to examine whom you might be biased toward, not just whom you might be biased against.

Bias, it's just as often — if not more so — about unintentionally favoring certain groups, regardless of whether they're more deserving. Often, these groups are the ones we belong to or are favored by society. To surface your biases, you need to examine whom you might be biased toward (i.e., inclined to favor), not just whom you might be biased against (i.e., inclined to overlook, avoid, or harm).

Which groups might you unknowingly be favoring? Even considering this question can help you check your assumptions, as can meeting different types of people who change your expectations of what's possible.

For example, when experienced sales manager Shahan Mohideen began hiring people early in his career, he favored candidates who were brash and extroverted. "That's how my sales leaders were, and they were successful," he says. "I didn't know any other way." That all changed when he met a sales leader — one of the best he's ever seen — who was a reserved introvert.

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Misconception #3

I can't do anything about my unconscious bias

If you care about how bias affects you and the people around you, then you're already on your way. Researchers find that one of the best predictors of whether people can reduce their biases is simply whether they have the desire to.

Here are additional ways to overcome your biases:

1. **Learn more about your colleagues and expand your professional network.**

Unconscious biases often result from your brain taking shortcuts based on what it assumes to be true. So there is perhaps no better way to challenge biases than by learning more about the individuals you work with and different kinds of people in general. Take time in 1-on-1s to gauge people's true interests and ambitions, and add people with backgrounds different from yours to your professional network.

2. **Create fair-minded processes for things you tend to do off-the-cuff.**

Rather than impromptu delegation, determine who's really best for the task. Also, ensure you're giving the right amount and type of feedback to each team member.

3. **Team up to disrupt bias-prone procedures at your company.**

For example, you could work with other diversity-minded hiring managers to find and tap new sources of diverse job candidates.





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Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to form **new** connections and neural pathways.

Creating change in how our brains process information takes time and effort, but we **can rewire** our thinking.



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Misconception #4

Unconscious bias is so subtle that anyone hurt by it is being too sensitive

Instances of unconscious bias can be so subtle — and in some cases hard to discern whether bias was even at play — that when others point it out, we accuse them of being too sensitive, too soft, or too quick to blame bias for everything.

The people accused of being too sensitive often aren't upset about, say, a single instance of being talked over in a meeting, but rather about years of dealing with a litany of similar slights. Acts of bias add up. A 90-minute commute may only be bothersome at first, but the true cost becomes apparent over time, after missing out on umpteen family dinners or learning opportunities.

If you're unsure why someone is distressed about bias, try asking for the person's perspective before passing judgment:

> ***"I've never walked in your shoes, so I admit I can't possibly know your perspective. Do you mind sharing it with me? I think it would help me see where you're coming from."***





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Misconception #5

People are talking about unconscious bias because conscious bias isn't much of an issue anymore

Bias, prejudice, and discrimination, in all their many forms, are still an ever-present reality in society. In the U.S., for instance, official workplace discrimination charges have risen in the past 20 years. Even when we asked managers to share their experiences with unconscious bias, many couldn't help but share experiences with more blatant acts. One manager replied that a colleague who is transgender has been referred to as "it." In addition, multiple female managers spoke of repeated sexual harassment at work, like "unwanted advances" and being "groped." These instances are examples of behavior that may be illegal and warrant reporting to HR.

To some, by comparison, unconscious bias may not seem as serious. However, to some it may be. Because we aren't aware they're happening, unconscious biases can sneak in and lead to systemic biases like hiring disparities and pay gaps.

The point is they're all worth striving to overcome — and a lot of the same tips and tactics can be used for both purposes.



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Misconception #6

It's never worth responding when you're the target of bias in the workplace





You do have options and considering them can help you determine your best course of action.

In many cases, reacting to bias carries enough political risk that many feel all they can do is vent to a trusted colleague or significant other or let it go. Those are perfectly OK responses if they're what's best for your situation.

In a recent survey, several people expressed regret that they hadn't done more. One individual, recalling a potentially sexist comment from her manager, said, "I decided it was too risky to press further. I wish I had anyway, or come up with a way to do that without putting him on the defensive."

You do have options, and considering them can help you determine your best course of action. If you decide to respond, here are two options that may be effective:

1. **Speak up by telling the person how bias impacts you.**

Since most people don't intend to be biased, calling out someone as such, even when you're right, likely won't be well received — and it can increase the risk you take on. More effective: Assume best intent and share how the bias makes you feel. For example:

> ***"I'm sure you didn't mean it this way, but when you called my talk a 'little presentation' it made me feel like you don't value it as much as those by others on the team."***

2. **Team up to amplify your voice.**

That might mean banding together with colleagues to advocate for more diversity and inclusion initiatives at your company.

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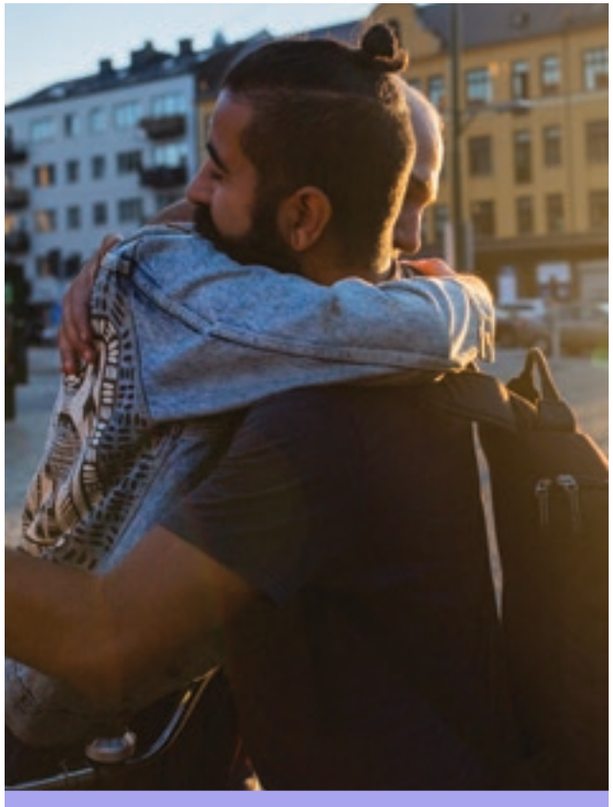
When you effectively confront bias, you **create a space** where we are all **valued** and able to **contribute** our best.



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Misconception #7

Being an ally means my biases are more in check





You do have options and considering them can help you determine your best course of action.

If you care about social justice, you might brand yourself an ally — someone doing their part. If so, there's a decent chance your biases really are more in check. Still, there are plenty of pitfalls lurking for allies, such as:

- **Using unbiased language as license to avoid questioning yourself.**

  In the U.S., this is known as the "I have black/gay/disabled friends" defense, which can lead to complacency. Researchers find that, ironically, thinking of times when you were biased tends to temporarily lower your guard against bias.

- **Assuming a level of comfort that's unprofessional.**

  Maybe outside of work you have a diverse set of close friends who joke about obesity, mental health, race, and culture. That doesn't mean such jokes are, or ever will be, welcome by everyone at work.

- **Overcompensating.**

  This is the ally with a figurative megaphone, taking every opportunity to shout, "I'm an ally!" While publicly expressing your support helps set a tone of inclusion, it can be overdone. One manager, who is gay, told us about an executive who seems intent on talking about LGBTQ issues with him, to the point where "other people have commented on it — asking why she always asks me only about gay things."

- **Overly attributing behaviors to bias.**

  While bias is everywhere, so is effort, luck, ability, absent-mindedness, and a slew of other factors that affect workplace outcomes. It's important to remind yourself that there can be multiple things going on at once, versus just one.

The lesson: An ally's work is never done.

For additional information about how we can help your organization identify your unconscious biases, email us at info@leadershipresources.my

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